

VULCHITRUN GOLD TREASURE



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BULGARIA'S TREASURES

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The Vulchitrun gold treasure is one of the world's rarest and most interesting toreutic monuments. It is a set of 13 vessels made of an alloy whose components have the following ratios: gold - 88.15%; silver - 9.7%; copper - 1.74% and iron - 0.4%. Total weight of the set: 12.425 kg.

*Dedicated to the 110th anniversary
of the Archaeology Museum in Sofia (1892-2002)*

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www.borina.com

ISBN 954-500-094-5

The famous Vulchitrun gold treasure is among the most precious exhibits in Bulgaria's oldest museum, the Archaeological Museum in Sofia. Once in, the visitor forgets the daily hustle and bustle in the magnetic shine of the 13 objects, which vary in size and shape and that together are considered to be one of the world's largest and oldest treasures. The shape, make and function and the intriguing circumstances in which the treasure was discovered have been teasing curiosity for decades and while laymen feasted their eyes, scholars worked hard to explain.

As the two brothers Tsvetanov worked in their vineyard in the village of Vulchitrun, Pleven district, on a grim December day in 1924, their spades touched metal and several vessels with lids, dark and with caked earth all over, were unearthed. The

two brothers and the 15 farmhands cleaned the vessels on the spot. The number and the size of vessels invited the conclusion, that turned out to be a wrong one, that they were made of brass which was taken to be an indication of buried money. The objects were thrown away; the big bowl was convenient as it had two solid handles and one of the brothers made it a

A big gold vessel of two parts held together by silver soldering. The two handles are drawn from the mouth and soldered to the vessel. They are attached by means of gold nails with broad conical heads outside, riveted by plates that form part of a sphere inside the vessel. The handles have five ornamented edges divided by four cannelures. The end and middle edges have incised lines; the other two are smooth and form the lower side of the handle together with the ornament in the middle shaped like a fishtail.

*Height: 22.4 cm; weight: 4,395 g.
Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3192.*





A big gold drinking vessel with a high handle, vertically grooved and striated. Two concentric circles form the bottom of the vessel.

*Height: 18.3 cm; diameter: 16.2 cm; weight: 919 g.
Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3193.*

feeding trough for his pig. The hungry pig licked and licked and when the metal shone, they were shocked to see pure 23 carat gold. Then they quarreled over the division of the gains and cut some of the objects into

pieces, so today it is difficult to say what originally they looked like. The police and staff from the National Museum in Sofia (today the Archaeological Museum) interfered and it was just 13 vessels weighing 12.425 kg that were saved for the museum collections. The dating, the place of production, the origin, the function of the amazing objects and their uniqueness in Bulgarian and world heritage were all questions that were asked.

Many differing opinions were advanced on the interesting shape of





the Vulchitrun gold objects, their make, function and dating in past decades. The dating span has ranged from the Middle Bronze Age (2nd millennium BC) to the Great Migration of Peoples (5th-6th century).

The three small ladles have an almost hemispherical shape. The three edges around the mouths form a rim and are divided by cannelures. The handles are decorated with two bulging edges and one thick longitudinal cord in the middle. A granulated ornament runs along the edges. As the ladles are not heavy and because the handles are heavier, the ladles do

not stand firm on their bottoms. The cannelure is a typical motif of the Vulchitrun ornamentation. It occurs on cylindrical surfaces as a bunch of rings on the neck of the seven lids and of the three small ladles. It also occurs on the bottoms of the vessels. It forms a bird's tail at the handles of the five vessels.

Height: 8.2 cm; diameter: 4.5 cm; weight: 130 g. Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3194.

Height: 8.9 cm; diameter: 4.9 cm; weight: 132 g. Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3195.

Height: 8.2 cm; diameter: 4.5 cm; weight: 130 g. Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3204.





A big gold lid. The lid had a spherical knob with horizontal cannelures around the base and knob on top. The outer surface of the lid has geometric motifs all over owing to a silver festoon featuring spirals or curves of dots. The inside of the handle has a bronze pad imitating the shape of the knob. The pad rests on a solid circle of bronze with a cross in the middle to keep the two lids strong in place and prevent disfiguration.

Height: 12.6 cm; diameter: 37 cm; weight: 1850 g.

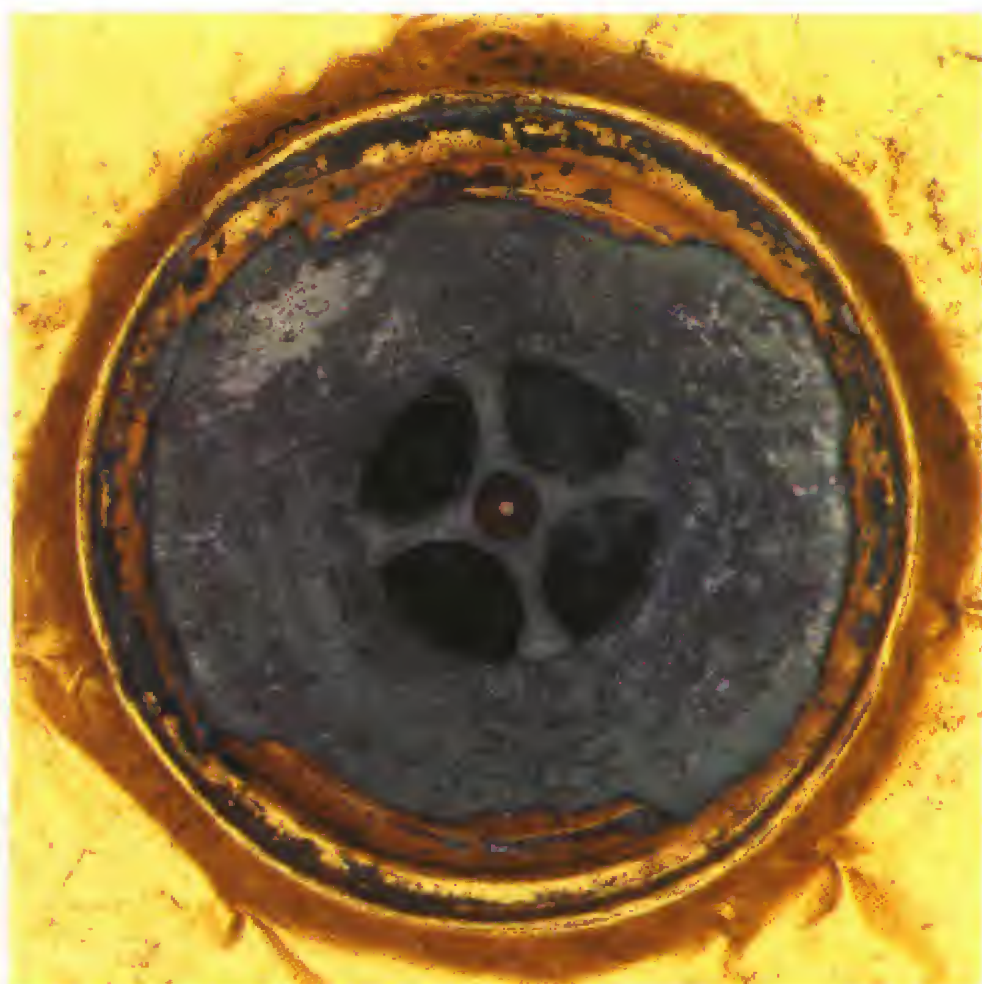
Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3196.

ond half of the 14th-early 13th century BC) and originates from the Carpathian-Danubian region. Archaeological finds from the area where the treasure was discovered indicate that it was possessed and used by a population belonging to a unique and large ethnic group, Thracians, inhabiting what is today Northwest



Bulgaria, Northeast Serbia and Southwest Romania. Who made those amazing objects and where and what function did they play? These are questions difficult to answer, as the shape, technique, decoration and materials are not paralleled by anything that scholars know about goldsmithery in the Balkans in those days.

The weight, which is untypical of objects from the best-known world gold production centers raises the question as to how gold and silver were extracted in that region. In-depth archaeological studies in past decades have shown that gold production existed in the Balkan Peninsula already in the second half of the 5th millennium BC in the Eneolith Period and that the local gold production centers were as good as those in Asia Minor. Silver objects were made from the 2nd millennium BC onwards as the peoples of the steppes moved from the Urals and the Caucasian Mountains to the Balkans. Spectrum analyses by German scientists on most of the ancient finds in Europe have shown that gold production already existed in the Late Bronze Age (and the Vulchitrun treasure is dated to that age) in Southeastern Europe and especially in the Carpathian-Transylvanian metal-bearing area with its rich deposits of a special variety of gold with tin admixtures and that goldsmiths were very skilled.



The middle part of the knob is reinforced by a gently cone-shaped bronze piece that is 15.6 mm in diameter and 3-4 mm thick. The round opening in the middle is 5.6 cm in diameter and takes to the inside of the knob. A festoon cross is cast in the opening of the knob neck and under the three cannelures that decorate it. The arms of the cross expand and four round openings (a quatrefoil) are formed between them.





Spectrum analyses of gold objects from the Danube basin have definitely shown that tin dominates in the gold and that gold production made a steady progress in the Carpathian-Transylvanian region in the Bronze Age. Scholars have reliable facts of gold production in late Bronze Age south of the river Danube and at the foothills of the western part of the Balkan Range. Adding the shipments of gold and silver from the Middle East like a gold ingot produced by a

A big gold lid with a spherical knob that has horizontal cannelure decoration. The lid has a bead on top. The outer surface of the lid has geometric motifs all over as a silver band featuring spirals or curves of dots is attached to it.

Height: 12.6 cm; diameter: 36 cm; weight: 1755 g.

Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3197.

marine archaeological expedition at Cape Kaliakra it is evident that the Lower Danube region was good for amassing gold and some silver and for the fast progress of production. Plenty

of finds dating from that period corroborate such progress. The Vulchitrun treasure though is unique for its intricate technology and original style. All subsequent studies have proved the kinship of the vessels, to be more specific the large vessel and the cups, to the Late Bronze Age Thracian pottery, and the decoration suggests the vessels were locally made. The big vessel is no longer an isolated phenomenon in gold working in Southeastern Europe. The technique points to a sound local tradition. Latest discoveries in the village of Krizhovlin, Odessa oblast, and in the village of Radeni in Western Moldova give evidence of this local form and together with a similar gold vessel from the village of Bija in Transylvania and similar finds from the village of Borodino in Bessarabia form a gold production area in the Lower Danube in the Late Bronze Age. No doubt the local Thracian population was involved in this production. The Vulchitrun treasure demonstrates a culture that has no origins in a preceding age and that was not to be repeated in the centuries ahead. The primitive tool used to make some of the details, the gold that was attached to bronze, the wide use of alloys of silver and gold, the niello technique, i.e. filling engraved lines with an alloy of silver and gold, and not encrusting metal on metal, on the big lids and the three-part receptacle



A gold lid with a knob decorated at the base and on the neck with three concentric circles. The knob has a bronze plate to fill it inside.

*Height: 11.5 cm; diameter: 21.5 cm; weight: 588 g.
Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3198.*

A gold lid most of which has been destroyed. The knob was cut when discovered.

*Height: 4.8 cm; diameter: 21 cm; weight: 300 g.
Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3201.*



are evidence of real art and excellent knowledge of the properties of silver. Those techniques were not developed in the Carpathian-Balkan area or in the remarkable Cretan-Mycenaean applied art in the neighboring region where they occur very rare and lead to assumptions of Middle East art. Remembering the shape of the lid knobs characteristic of the East (Egypt, Syria) it is to be concluded that precious metals were imported (the ingot from Kaliakra) and that goldsmiths moved from place to place as needed. It is most

plausible therefore that the Vulchitrun vessels of gold are to be attributed to an itinerant smith from the East who added a number of features from local gold working. He had to comply with the requirements of local goldsmithery and the unquestionable achievements of this art but also with the taste of those who had commissioned the set (a Thracian chieftain or a high priest) from a cultured local milieu so what he was left with was the demonstration of his skills. In typological terms the Vulchitrun treasure is a product of the local goldsmith art.

A gold lid whose knob has been cut off together with most of the vessel.

Height: 3.1 cm; diameter: 21.6 cm; weight: 207 g. Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3202.

No doubt the Vulchitrun gold treasure had a religious function. The assumption that the discs with bulb-



shaped knobs are musical instruments, cymbals, relating to the worship of the divinity child Zagreus in Thrace is not warranted. The specially carved flat ring in the periphery of the discs makes it impossible to use them as musical instruments. It must have had a practical function to make the objects fit well with the vessels whose size is relevant to them. Judging from the height of the ring, the vessels must have been solid, with thick walls, probably from bronze or clay. Therefore, the "mysterious" discs were the lids of receptacles for wine, mead and milk for the libations in the worship of the Thracian god Dionysus. The big cup was probably a requisite for the big vessel and three small cups, for the three-part receptacle where the liquids of the holy triad were mixed when the religious rite was performed. The most likely assumption is that the vessels were possessions of a major shrine of the Dionysian worship. Different materials were used to make the objects. The five vases are made of gold; the three-part receptacle is gold and an alloy of silver and gold; the seven lids under the bulb of the knob in the central part stand on a solid pad of bronze. The inlaid ornaments, the hammered cannelures and pearls, the attached silver ornaments are perfect in execution. The three-part receptacle is of special interest for the unusual shape and cannelure surface. Details typical of local casting are prominent



A gold lid most of which has been cut and destroyed when discovered.

Height: 11.6 cm; diameter: 21.6 cm; weight: 462 g.

Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3199.

on the handle. Niello triangles and quadrangles decorate the handle. That special black composition containing silver appears on the Vulchitrun treasure and nowhere else in these lands. The bronze pads of the lids merit attention; these are a bulb and a ring with an opening and a festoon cross. The lid ornamentation comprises a thin piece of silver held to the golden background by two grooves in the silver and gold is extremely graceful.

The Vulchitrun gold treasure will remain a mystery to scholars for many more years. Yet the individual elements of the form and decoration are not beyond what the local crafts could have produced. This is one of the rea-



A three-part receptacle consisting of three individual hollow parts joined by two gently curved tubes of gold and silver alloy through which the liquid flowed. Each of the three egg-shaped vessels is covered with horizontal cannelures, and has a mouth for libations; a handle made of alloy of gold and silver is attached to the round back part. Niello geometric motifs on the handle.

Height: 5.3 cm; length: 23.9 cm; weight: 1190 g.

Archaeology Museum, Sofia, Inv. No 3203.

sons to attribute it to the Thracians. The concentration of gold artifacts in Northwest Bulgaria and in the Carpathian region proves a community of styles and art philosophies that gradually made the region a leader in gold working in the Balkans during the Bronze Age.





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ISBN 954-500-094-5